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Hon. Steve Israel
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Mr. Speaker, I want to thank Chairman Pombo and Ranking Member Rahall for bringing this bill to the floor today. I also want to thank my colleague from Connecticut, Representative Simmons, and the rest of the members of the Long Island Sound Caucus for their very hard work on this legislation and their ongoing efforts to preserve and protect the Long Island Sound. I have the privilege of serving as co-chair of the Congressional Long Island Sound Caucus with the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Simmons) and we have worked together for many years in the hope that this bill would become a reality. I was proud to introduce it with the gentleman from Connecticut, and I am proud of the Long Island Caucus for standing behind it every step of the way.

This bill is bipartisan. It is bicoastal. It is bicameral. It is one of the most important initiatives that we can take to protect the Long Island Sound, to identify and enhance sites with ecological, educational, and recreational value in Connecticut and New York. And it does so in a way that is consistent with the vision put forward by a consortium of local groups who have been working for over a decade to save the sound.

The Long Island Sound is one of our Nation's great natural wonders. It sustains a diversity of birds, wildlife, and marine organisms. It is a very important part of the national economy. It remains a vital component of our identity, our way of life.

Today over 8 million people live in the sound's watershed and 20 million people live within 50 miles of its shores. The sound alone contributes \$5 billion to the regional economy through sport and commercial fishing, recreation and tourism.

Mr. Speaker, I served for 8 years as a member of the Huntington Town Board, and I worked with our local baymen and worked with different organizations to preserve the Long Island Sound, and I am acutely aware of the many environmental challenges that confront our community. In fact, my town and many others initiated bond acts, asking local taxpayers to come up with a few more dollars to support and protect the Long Island Sound. And I always believed that the Federal Government should be more of a partner with local townships. And tonight we take the first big step in that new partnership.

This bill creates a purely voluntary process to protect coastal areas along the Long Island Sound. It creates a process that will bring together stakeholders on a committee, including Connecticut and New York representatives from the Federal Government, the State government, local governments, non-government organizations, academic, private and development interests. This is a critically important step.

And, Mr. Speaker, before I close, I just want to mention that, in fact, this bill has been the product of cooperation at all levels of government with advocacy groups in both New York and Connecticut, and I am grateful to all of them for their input.

On a personal note, I have been very fortunate to have a wonderful staff for working on this legislation for most of the last 4 years. And I want to thank Karen Agostisi, who devoted so much of her time to this effort and helped navigate this bill through the sometimes choppy and turbulent waters of the Long Island Sound. I was privileged to work with the gentleman from Connecticut.

This is a very important step for this Federal and local partnership. I urge a ``yes" vote on this bill. And again I thank the gentleman for his cooperation. I thank my colleagues for their consideration.